



WHY WE NEED THE CONCEPT OF LAND-GRAB-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT

Frances Thomson¹

Abstract

This paper challenges the traditional threefold classification of forced migration, and proposes a new concept: land-grab-induced displacement. The concept sheds light on issues that are shrouded by the conventional typology. Displacement, frequently treated as the 'collateral damage' of war and climate change, or an unfortunate sacrifice necessitated by 'development', may often be better understood as part of the political economy of land. The notion of land-grab-induced displacement encapsulates cases in which people are forcibly uprooted primarily so that others can control the land and its resources. The argument draws on three examples –from Colombia, Ethiopia and Southeast Asia post-tsunami– in order to highlight the limitations of the standard categorisation, and the need to better integrate land questions into our analytical frameworks of forced displacement.

Keywords: forced displacement; land grabbing; critical political economy

The Journal of Internal Displacement (JID), established July 2009, is the only scholarly journal committed to all displacement concerns worldwide. Thanks to the generous voluntary contribution from the advisory board and editorial team - manuscript submission, peer-review and publication of the JID is **FREE OF CHARGE**. The JID does not charge authors to submit articles.

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Subscription: JID is a Free Open Access Journal

Archives: <http://journalinternaldisplacement.webs.com/archives.htm>

Submission (July 2014 Edition): <http://journalinternaldisplacement.webs.com/submission.htm>

AUTHOR'S AFFILIATION:

¹ESRC-funded doctoral researcher, Centre for Global Political Economy, Department of International Relations, University of Sussex, England

DISCLOSURE: Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Journal of Internal Displacement and its editorial team.

DATE of ACCEPTANCE: This manuscript was submitted on 1 May 2014 and accepted for publication on 25 June 2014.

CORRESPONDENCE: Frances Thomson, ft26@sussex.ac.uk / francesthomson22@gmail.com

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author has indicated that she has no conflict of interest and/or financial relationship related to this article to disclose. During field research, ethical standards were strictly adhered to.

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It was April 12, 1997. That day men appeared in town, threatening people, saying that we had to leave, that we had to abandon the town because the land we were occupying wasn't ours. [...] They began to massacre people, to mistreat them, as if they were animals. There was no choice left for people but to flee. [...] In 2000, we decided to return to our lands. [...] We had to return to what was our life, our bread. [...] On September 12, 2001, they [the paramilitaries] reappeared [...] they said that they were going to kill everyone, down to the smallest child [...] Some people ran for their lives, throwing themselves into the river or fleeing into the jungle [...] They summoned those that remained to say that everyone had to abandon town, that the land was there's, that we shouldn't have returned to get in the way [...] With that we realized that all that aggression against us, against the communities in the basin, had been for land, for our land, to take our land away. - A young man from Chocó, Colombia (IDMC 2007, 190–194)

We want the world to hear that government brought the Anuak people here to die. They brought us no food, they gave away our land to the foreigners so we can't even move back. On all sides the land is given away, so we will die here in one place. - An Anuak elder from Gambella, Ethiopia (Human Rights Watch 2012a, 25)

We are determined to keep our land but we as a group will consider housing in a safer place only if we can continue with our fishing and farming as we have been doing until two months ago. But we are worried that someone will take our land with the help of the government. We have heard that foreigners want to build hotels on our beach. - A woman from Komari, Sri Lanka (Shanmugaratnam 2005, 1)

Introduction

These testimonials reflect wider stories that would typically be categorised as cases of conflict, development and disaster-induced displacement respectively. At times, however, these conventional categories of forced migration conceal more than they reveal. In particular, this popular tripartite sketch of displacement diverts our attention away from what is often a pivotal component of the tragedy: land. As I shall argue, the broader chronicles behind the short passages above are better described as instances of land-grab-induced displacement.

The first section provides a brief overview of the conventional classification of forced displacement and its limitations, arguing for the need for a concept of land-grab-induced displacement. These ideas are expanded upon in the rest of the paper, which is divided into three parts - one for each of the three orthodox categories. These sections weave the stories underlying the above quotations into a critique of the standard typology, drawing attention to the centrality of land issues in each case. The concluding section proposes a political economy framework as the basis for further work on the notion of land-grab-induced displacement.

Overview: the conventional typology of forced displacement and its shortcomings

Typically the term 'displacement' invokes an image of mass flight from a violent context. Less frequently we might think of those people evicted from their homes to make way for large infrastructural projects. Finally, on occasion, forced displacement is associated with natural disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes. These images reflect the conventional categorisation of displacement or forced migration into three main types, according to the presumed cause:

conflict, development, and disaster -induced (Forced Migration Online 2013)¹. I will review this typology briefly before examining its limitations.

Conflict-induced displacement refers to the uprooting of people as a consequence of “armed conflict, generalised violence or human rights violations” (IDMC 2012, 6). For many observers, only conflict-induced displacement counts as forced displacement ‘proper’. As suggested by Leckie (2002), “millions of people displaced each year outside the context of armed conflicts” are not “traditionally classified as IDPs [internally displaced persons]” (p. 20). Most national and international assistance programs are directed exclusively towards those displaced by violent conflict (Leckie 2002). Statistics on forced displacement usually exclude development and disaster-induced types, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Thus the figure of 42.5 million people (15.2 million refugees; 895,000 asylum seekers; 26.4 million internally displaced), as of 2011, living in a state of forced displacement across the world (UNHCR 2012b) refers only to people displaced by conflict.

Development-induced displacement (or in the sanitised language of many international agencies such as the World Bank: ‘involuntary resettlement’) applies to the forced eviction of people to make way for ‘development’ projects. The emphasis is usually on displacement linked to infrastructural projects, such as dams, roads or ports; however, urban ‘regeneration’, mining, agro-industry and conservation are also sometimes included in this category (Forced Migration Online 2013). Conservative estimates suggest that globally around 10 million people are displaced by development projects every year (De Wet 2002, 6). For some, development-induced displacement is “a forgotten category” (Leckie 2002, 20), ‘surrounded’ by a “deafening silence” (Pettersson 2002, 16); the fact that the UN definition of an IDP makes no explicit reference to it seems to attest to this².

Disaster-induced displacement denotes forced migration caused by ‘natural’³ hazards of “rapid onset” such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, tsunamis, floods, and wild fires (IDMC 2013a). Some observers additionally include within this category: industrial disasters, such as oil and chemical spills; and more gradual onset disasters and other types of environmental change, such as sea level rise, land degradation, deforestation or drought (Forced Migration Online 2013). According to IDMC (2013a), between 2008 and 2012 around 144 million people were forced to migrate as a result of “rapid onset” disasters.

This threefold classification diverts attention away from the struggles over resources and territory that are often vital for understanding the stories behind forced displacement. Displacement appears as something incidental: the ‘collateral damage’ of war or climate change. Of the three, only the development type evokes the idea of displacement as a deliberate action of dispossession. Still, the word ‘development’ connotes justifiability and righteousness; the displaced appear as the ‘collateral damage’ of socioeconomic ‘progress’. Thus, the conventional typology predisposes us to overlook, downplay and/or de-politicise land questions. It fails to explicitly and sufficiently address land grabbing as an underlying cause of forced displacement.

¹These three types of displacement are used to describe both migrants forced across international borders (few of whom are granted legal refugee status) and *internally* displaced persons. This paper focuses on cases of internal displacement.

²The United Nations (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement) definition of an IDP makes direct reference to both conflict-induced and disaster-induced, but not development-induced displacement: the term IDP refers to “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (UNOCHA 2004, Introduction, Point 2).

³It is widely recognised that many ‘natural’ disasters have varied human causes such as deforestation, carbon emissions, urbanisation, construction of dams, etc. (IDMC 2013a; Forced Migration Online 2013).

Of course, the causes of displacement often overlap in complex ways. In this sense, it may not be wholly inaccurate to classify a particular case of displacement as (e.g.) ‘conflict-induced’. The problem, as I will argue below, is that such labelling may obscure, rather than aid, understanding. I maintain that where control of the land and its resources (in particular, for private profit) is the main motivation for forcing people from their homes, the notion of land-grab-induced displacement facilitates a more precise description of the situation.

It is important to recognise that some land grabs are opportunist ventures, which take advantage of displacement resulting from conflict or disaster. In other words, the initial displacement *is* sometimes an *inadvertent* consequence of conflict or disaster, rather than having been imposed directly by those with economic and political interest in the land. It is debatable whether in such cases the term ‘land-grab-induced displacement’ can be reasonably applied. Still, this opportunist type land grab may be the primary reason behind a denial of the “right to return”, thereby contributing to situations of “protracted displacement” (terminology from: Forced Migration Online 2013). The need to better integrate the political economy of land into our analytical frameworks of forced displacement is just as imperative in such cases.

I do not mean to imply that all instances of forced displacement are deliberate, nor that they are all linked to land grabs. Some cases are relatively accurately encapsulated by the three traditional categories. However, many are not. My concern is that current understanding of forced displacement is limited and distorted by the three categories used by international institutions, governments, NGOs and many academics, and reproduced in the media and thus popular thought. Of course, the relationship between land questions and forced displacement is familiar to many specialists and critical scholars, who may feel that I am stating a truism. And yet, surprisingly, there has been little or no attempt to integrate the political economy of land with theorisations of forced displacement. On the one hand, many political economists studying land grabbing tend to reference or footnote the issue of forced displacement. On the other hand, specialists in forced displacement often bracket or even outright ignore land issues. Even some of the (otherwise) most competent and admirable organisations working on forced migration fail to provide systematic analyses of this link between displacement and land grabs. In what follows I expand on these arguments with reference to the three cases linked to the opening quotations.

I chose these three cases deliberately to illustrate the limitations of each of the conventional categories: Colombia for conflict-induced displacement, Ethiopia for development-induced displacement, and South-East Asia (post-tsunami) for disaster-induced displacement. I consider that all of these cases exemplify the need for a concept of land-grab-induced displacement. Finally, the selection purposefully covers a diversity of places geographically to suggest that land-grab-induced displacement is a phenomenon common to dissimilar societies, while highlighting how it takes different forms within specific contexts⁴. Of course, these are not the only instances in which the argument of this paper applies. I hope that others will go on to investigate the relationship between the political economy of land and forced displacement in different cases and in more depth.

Conflict and land grab-induced displacement in Colombia

The excerpt (above) from a young Chocoano man’s narrative of forced displacement throws light on the intimate ties between the political economy of land and violent conflict in Colombia (see: Thomson 2011; Grajales 2011; Reyes Posada 2009; Richani 2002). The displacement of circa

⁴Systematic case selection techniques, on the whole, are intended to serve as an alternative to experimental or statistical control (see: Collier, 1993, 106-107); this is not my purpose here.

five million Colombians since the middle of the 1990s⁵ coincides (not incidentally) with what some have referred to as the “third phase of agrarian counter-reform” (Caballero 2008). Between 6 and 8 million hectares of land have been abandoned by and/or usurped from the displaced (Salinas Abdala 2011, 8). The majority of this land was formerly campesino smallholdings or part of indigenous and Afro-Colombian collective territories (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010, 50; Reyes Posada 2009); thus dispossession contributed to the concentration of land ownership in a country where historical rural inequality was already extreme⁶. Areas with high levels of displacement correspond not only to zones of violent conflict, but also to those with investment interests, especially in mining and agro-industries (Codhes 2012, 3–5; Codhes 2011, 2–7).

The main perpetrators of this bloody counter-reform have been paramilitary and narco-trafficking groups (often indiscernible), which consolidated as central actors in the conflict in the 1980s (Cubides 2001; Richani 2002). Though guerrilla forces are also to blame for violent displacement in Colombia, they have shown less interest in laying formal claim to the abandoned land (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010, 112). The paramilitaries, in contrast, have consistently sought to appropriate the lands of the displaced, using it for (e.g.) cattle, tourism and agricultural enterprises. This practice has been sufficiently systematic as to earn them the label: “armed companies of territorial conquest” (Reyes Posada 2009, 114). One member of the ‘Bloque Metro’ paramilitary squadron even avowed outright that they were undertaking “a great agrarian counter-reform” (Mingorance 2006, 43).

The mechanisms of dispossession are diverse (Verdad Abierta 2013; Grajales 2011; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010; Reyes Posada 2009). Typically paramilitaries use direct threats, individual assassinations or massacres to sow fear, causing either selective displacement or mass exodus. In general, the usurpers have sought to legalise their (or their front-men’s) occupancy of the land; methods for this vary, in part, depending on whether the land in question is privately owned, part of indigenous or afro-Colombian collective territories, or state property. In many cases private titles were transferred under coercion, usually sold at extremely low prices or without payment at all. This type of dispossession is succinctly captured by the well-known paramilitary dictum: ‘If you don’t sell, we will negotiate with your widow’. In other cases local land registries were purposefully destroyed and sometimes forgery and fraud served to legalise the new possession. Many of the displaced were not legal owners of the land they had formerly farmed, but ‘squatters’ on public terrain or in the process of applying for a title. In such cases the physical removal of people was sufficient since occupancy and use is a prerequisite for ‘legitimate’ claim to the land. Even where people had been granted titles by the state prior to their displacement, under certain conditions the government could revoke these rights (and transfer them to new occupants) if the land was ‘abandoned’. Some government officials collaborated in legalising pillaged lands by a diversity of means. The dynamic is vividly captured by the author Alfredo Molano: “The agrarian policies of the last few governments have been, in practice, a drama in three acts. In the first act, the paramilitaries enter, chainsaws in hand, and

⁵According to the NGO Codhes, 5,712,506 people were displaced in Colombia between 1985 and 2012, while government statistics are 4,774,046 between 1996 and 2012. Aside from the years not included in the latter estimate, a general divergence between Codhes and government figures can be attributed to the fact that “the government does not count intra-urban displacement, displacement caused by new paramilitary groups, or displacement due to crop fumigations. It includes only those registered in the national IDP registry” (IDMC 2012, 57), which many argue is under-representative for various reasons (Codhes 2012, 11).

⁶According to one study, the land gini coefficient rose from 0.86 in 2000 to 0.88 in 2009 (cited in: Salinas, 2011, 4). It is estimated that 78.3% of landowners (with properties of between 1 and 5 ha) occupy only 6% of total arable land, while a minority of 0.15% (with properties of over 1,000 ha) control 55% (Salinas, 2011, 16).

displace the campesinos. In the second, the government negotiates with the paramilitaries, and in the final act, it distributes the lands to large investors” (CIPCOL 2008).

Though some of the usurped land may be used for cultivation and processing of illicit crops or illegal mining, the diverse interests implicated in this land-grabbing reach beyond the shadow economy. As noted by Grajales (2011), “spurious properties have been legalized and partly integrated into the global economy via agribusiness and the land market” (p. 772). Paramilitaries themselves claim that they contribute positively to Colombia’s economic development by providing ‘security’ for private investments (Grajales 2011; Maher and Thomson 2011; Stokes 2005; The New York Times 2000). Here I refer to a mere handful of the many cases to illustrate my point.

At the end of the 1990s thousands of people were violently displaced in the region of Chocó. Some of those displaced later attempted to return home only to find that their land had been converted into palm oil cultivations; some 35,000 hectares were appropriated from the afro-Colombian communities’ collective territories by a group of palm-oil businesses (IEPRI & CNRR 2009, 89–90). Similar accusations have been made against banana plantations operated by Multifruits (Bajak 2006) and timber companies such as Maderas del Darién/Pizano S.A. (CDCA 2013), both also operating in Chocó. In the Guajira (region with the largest coal mining operations in the country), a number of authority figures from the Wayuu community maintain that mega-mining projects are directly linked to the paramilitary violence exercised in the area (Vargas Valencia 2013, 61). A report published by the Colombian Constitutional Court (GOC 2009) states: “apparently some economic actors have allied with irregular armed actors [... who commit] acts of violence that eliminate or displace the indigenous from their ancestral territories, clearing the way for the implementation of productive [agro-industry and mining] projects” (p. 8). The report notes that in some areas the link between armed groups and economic interests “is **one of the principle causes** of forced displacement” (GOC 2009, 8, my emphasis). According to one study, 78% of forced displacement and 80% of human rights violations occur in municipalities (representing 35% of the national total) with mining and/or extraction activities (Vargas Valencia 2013, 63).

Despite the formal demobilization of the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or United Self-defence Forces of Colombia- the umbrella organisation formed in 1997 comprising numerous regional paramilitary groups) since the implementation of the Justice and Peace Law in 2005, the process of violent land usurpation continues. Some paramilitary groups never demobilized to begin with, others rearmed under a different guise, and a few (apparently) new squads have formed (Escobar 2013; El Espectador 2012). A report by the NGO Codhes notes that in many regions the supposedly demobilised paramilitaries have in fact “consolidated political hegemony [...] and economic power [...] especially in the area of tenancy and use of the land” (2009, 7). According to IDMC, “new paramilitary groups” were responsible for the majority of displacement in 2011 (2012, 58).

The figure of circa 5 million IDPs in Colombia officially refers to those displaced by violent conflict (if disaster and ‘development’ –induced displacement were included, the numbers would be considerably higher). Indeed, mainstream accounts use the category of ‘conflict-induced displacement’ to explain what is happening in Colombia (IDMC 2013b; IDMC 2012; UNHCR 2012b). The conflict-induced displacement label is, however, potentially misleading in that it lumps together what are actually quite distinct processes. There are substantial differences between forced displacement as ‘collateral damage’ or an incidental component of armed conflict, and violent forced displacement as a means of land grabbing. In a

hypothetical example of the former, two armed groups are fighting and the civilian population, caught up in the middle, is forced to flee. Here, uprooting people is not the purpose of the violence, but rather a side effect of it. In the latter type of displacement, in contrast, terror and violence are used to deliberately scare people off their land. In cases where the interest is in taking control of the land itself and/or the resources it holds, this may be called land-grab-induced displacement. This is not a minor quibble. Both the underlying cause (motives, reasons) and (certain) effects of forced displacement are different in the two cases, though the mechanism or immediate cause (violence) is the same. Distinguishing between these two forms of displacement has implications not only for understanding and explaining the problem, but also for policy makers. For instance, addressing cases of forced displacement (especially the possibility of return) where there is no interest in land and resource grabbing will be very different than cases where there is.

It is difficult to quantify the relationship between forced displacement and land grabbing in Colombia, and even more challenging to ascertain the proportion of those displaced as an unintended consequence of the conflict compared to those deliberately uprooted by groups with interests in the land. As argued by Grajales (2011), in Colombia “forced displacement is a complex phenomenon” that “follows diverse logics”, often (but not always) “bound up to land contention” (p. 783). Interestingly, 43.07% of displaced people (included in the government registry) claim that direct “threats” from armed groups were the main reason for leaving, compared to only 6.65% who said they left due to “armed confrontation” (Ibáñez and Querubín 2004, 42)⁷. This statistic highlights why it is too simplistic to impute displacement in conflict zones to ‘collateral damage’, and indicates the possibility that a significant proportion of the 43% who fled their homes due to direct threats were threatened because of an interest in appropriating their land. The government register also indicates that 40.7% of displaced people reported having ‘abandoned’ their land (UNHCR 2012a, 1)⁸. Though, again, it is not known how much of this abandoned land was usurped, either directly (at the time of displacement) or opportunistically ex-post facto. The Historical Memory Group (2010) describes many reasons for lack of quantitative data: the displaced may not know the fate of the land they left behind, many areas are inaccessible to researchers, the details of specific cases are shrouded in secrecy, and the complex variety of modalities of dispossession within and between regions further obstruct broad statistical description. Nevertheless, *qualitative* research findings suggest that there is a systemic relationship between land grabbing and violent forced displacement in Colombia (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010, 27). In the words of Jacobo Grajales: in Colombia “forced displacement as a land grabbing strategy is sufficiently well-documented to be considered as a proven fact” (2011, 783). Hence, the concept of land-grab-induced displacement captures the specificity of the problem in a way that the broad notion of conflict-induced displacement cannot. Furthermore, by making land-grabbing the focal point, the latter concept requires us to examine precisely those issues that have been sidelined in many analyses of forced migration, as shown in the remainder of this section.

⁷The reasons included in order of percentages are: “threats”, 43.07%; “assassination”, 8.36%; “armed confrontation”, 6.65%; “forced recruitment”, 3.36%; “disappearance or torture”, 1.34%; and “fumigation”, 0.46% (Ibáñez and Querubín 2004, 42). This, however, only totals 63.24%; it is unclear what accounts for the other 36.75%. Furthermore, it is important to know what is meant by “threat” or “assassination”; for example, to see how the survey was phrased in order to understand the data better.

⁸There are also other indicators of the centrality of land issues, such as the growing number of crimes committed by the self-denominated “anti-restitution army” (*Semana* 2012) and the assassination of 64 land-restitution leaders since 2008 (Valbuena 2013).

The lack of thorough analyses and empirical investigation of land grabs in the mainstream literature on forced migration highlights the need for the concept of land-grab-induced displacement. Of course, the community of researchers working on the issue of forced migration are not totally blind to a) the fact that displacement is often purposeful rather than accidental or a form of ‘collateral damage’ and b) the role that competing interests in land and resources may play. Nevertheless, the treatment of these issues is tangential at best. For example, in the thematic section of the (otherwise) comprehensive and much referenced Forced Migration Online webpage, “land” did not even appear in a list of over thirty key themes. Here I will focus on the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, which itself claims to be “the *leading source of information and analysis* on internal displacement caused by [i] armed conflict, [ii] generalised violence and [iii] violations of human rights worldwide” (IDMC 2012, 94, my emphasis).

In terms of recognising that displacement is often purposeful rather than incidental, the IDMC includes, alongside the aforementioned causes, the category of “[iv] deliberate policies or practices of arbitrary displacement” (2012, 6); making reference to cases such as: “when policies are aimed to alter ethnic, religious or racial composition [...]; in armed conflict, unless civilian security or military necessity so demand; when used as a collective punishment” (2011, 14)⁹. This definition of ‘deliberate’ displacement does not necessarily rule out land and resource usurpation, but that it is not a primary example is symptomatic of an overall disregard for the issue. And while conflict over resources and land is mentioned (notably, separate from deliberate displacement) in at least 25% of the country profiles included in the IDMC’s annual report (2012), these remain mere passing references. Interestingly, the profile on Colombia expressly denies that there is a “deliberate policy or practice of arbitrary displacement” in the country (2013b, 38), and does NOT mention the relationship between conflict, displacement and land/natural resources (2012, 58; 2013b, 38). In the case of Colombia the listed causes are: “armed conflict, human rights violations” (IDMC 2012, 58) and “criminal violence” (IDMC 2013b, 38). In general, the lack of systematic analyses of deliberate forced displacement and conflicts over land and resources –even as separate issues, let alone as interlinked problems- is a serious oversight. And, in the case of Colombia in particular, the IDMC’s profile of the country is gravely misrepresentative.

It would seem the most ‘profound’ discussion provided in the IDMC (2012) report that makes reference to both intentional displacement and the question of land and resources is a small text-box entitled: “Forced evictions: a widespread cause of secondary displacement”. Displacement caused by forced eviction was documented in 18 of the countries included in the report. Most of these cases were of displaced people who were uprooted a second time when evicted from the places to which they had originally fled such as “camps or collective centres, [...] abandoned houses or informal settlements”; however, forced evictions “to make way for the cultivation of profitable crops or other projects [...] or] for environmental purposes” are also briefly mentioned (IDMC 2012, 21). Interestingly, “[i]n half of the situations where forced evictions were reported, the responsible authorities cited *development objectives* as the primary *justification*” (ibid, my emphasis).

Undoubtedly the IDMC report includes only a relatively small number of total forced evictions, since otherwise the figures of displacement would necessarily be much higher; consider that, as stated above, it is (*under*-)estimated that 10 million are displaced by ‘development’ initiatives *each year*. How did the organisation decide which cases of forced

⁹The 2011 and 2012 reports (published 2012, 2013) include “deliberate” displacement in the list of causes, but do not define this category. Thus, the definition is taken from the 2010 report (published 2011).

evictions to include in their report and which to ignore? For example, why were those evicted by the Zimbabwean government for the land reform program included (IDMC 2012, 54) and not those displaced by the Colombian government for the expansion of mining projects (González 2010, 2)? Given that the IDMC itself claims that its report pertains to “internal displacement caused by [i] armed conflict, [ii] generalised violence and [iii] violations of human rights” (2012, 6 and 94), it would seem that the inclusion of forced evictions depends on these being classified as a “violation of human rights”. The excerpt notes: “Not all evictions, even those carried out against the resident’s will, constitute a violation of a person’s rights” (IDMC 2012, 21). But which evictions are classified as “violations of human rights” and why? The authors mention existing principles, such as those provided in the UN Guidelines, but on the whole, give no coherent account of the criteria by which some instances of forced eviction were included, while others were excluded from their report. In any case, the inclusion of at least some instances of “forced eviction”, in a report subtitled “People internally displaced by conflict and violence” (IDMC 2012), seems to indicate that the organization recognises, albeit in a vague and implicit manner, the blurring of division lines between conflict-induced and development-induced displacement. Indeed, the cited excerpt ends: “In Papua, development-based evictions resulted in tensions and riots between evicted indigenous Papuans and the armed forces protecting development projects there, creating an additional risk of violence-induced displacement” (IDMC 2012, 21). As discussed below, the construction of a false dichotomy between conflict-induced and development-induced displacement represents yet another shortfall in the traditional typology of forced migration.

Displaced for *development*? The case of Ethiopia’s land lease program

The second passage at the start of this article represents the experience of just one of over half a million Ethiopians who have been displaced by their own government since 2008 (The Oakland Institute 2013, 5, 13–en4). Much of this displacement is under the guise of ‘villagization’, which according to the government is a ‘voluntary’ resettlement program aimed at concentrating families in villages in order to improve access to social services and infrastructure. Official government plans consist of resettling 1.5 million people in four regions: Gambella, Afar, Somali, and Benishangul-Gumuz (The Oakland Institute 2013, 7; Human Rights Watch - henceforth HRW- 2012a, 2).

Many of the villagization areas are the same as those targeted by the land-leasing program, which facilitates direct agricultural investment channelled through a centralised land bank. The Ethiopian government offers a range of investment incentives (low cost leases, tax breaks, legal protections) to encourage large-scale agricultural projects on so-called ‘unused land’. It claims that this program will attract foreign currency to the country, promote technology transfers to small-scale farmers, and improve food security (The Oakland Institute 2013, 6–7; Abbink 2011). Between 2008 and 2010 the government leased circa 3.6 million hectares of land to domestic and foreign investors¹⁰. As of January 2011, another 2.1 million hectares were being offered for lease through the government land bank. In Gambella some 42% of the regional land area has either already been leased or is tagged as available through the land bank (HRW 2012a, 3–4).

¹⁰Human Rights Watch (2012a) only gives specific details of two foreign investors leasing land in the Gambella region (the focus of its report): Saudi Star and Karuturi Global Ltd. (p. 55). Abbink (2011, Appendix 2) provides a more comprehensive list of large-scale foreign land deals across Ethiopia.

In sum, both the land-leasing project and the villagization program are allegedly designed to further the country's economic and social development. There are, however, significant flaws in the developmental account of these schemes. Most of the information provided in the account that follows pertains to the Gambella region, where both Human Rights Watch (2012) and the Oakland Institute (2013) focused their research. Both organisations suspect, however, that what has been happening in Gambella is indicative of wider trends also affecting other parts of the country. For example, another Human Rights Watch report (2012b) examines forced displacement in the Lower Omo region linked to large irrigated agricultural projects downstream from the Gibe III dam (in construction since 2006). The broad reach of the phenomenon is also implied in Abbink (2011), who examines large-scale land acquisitions across Ethiopia.

Most of the land being leased to investors is not unused, as the government asserts. It is home to various indigenous groups whose lives depend on pastoralism, fishing, and/or shifting cultivation (The Oakland Institute 2013, 7; Abbink 2011, 518-519). Thus in order to facilitate the leasing of this land, the people living there were cleared off, their huts and crops destroyed- in some cases, burnt down by the army (The Oakland Institute 2013, 8; HRW 2012a, 29). Although the Ethiopian government denies any link between villagization and the leasing of land to investors, many displaced people have been explicitly told by officials (individually and at public meetings) that their land is needed for commercial agriculture and that this is the reason for their relocation. A number of ex-officials also admitted the land leasing-villagization link to researchers (HRW 2012a, 54-55). In a public meeting in December 2010, a regional governor in Gambella is reported to have told local communities (subject to displacement): "Lands you are using are not utilized. We have investors coming who will use more efficiently. Those who resist we will take all possible action" (cited in: HRW 2012a, 31, *sic*).

The assertion that the primary aim of villagization is to improve the wellbeing of local groups is highly questionable. There is strong evidence that resettlement is not truly voluntary. Often public meetings held to discuss the resettlement program were attended by army and police forces. Those who spoke out against the program were threatened, beaten, arrested, and in some instances, even assassinated (HRW 2012a, 25-37). Where public meetings were held, it seems the objective was to notify communities of their relocation, rather than consult with them (HRW 2012a, 29). In some instances, communities were not even informed in advance; government agents arrived without warning and forced families to move the very same day (The Oakland Institute 2013, 8). Many were forced to leave just before harvest and thus lost their crops (HRW 2012a, 40). Authorities who criticised villagization were fired, demoted or even imprisoned (HRW 2012a, 33-34). In sum: "Although Ethiopian officials claim that villagization is a voluntary program, investigations reveal that the government has forcibly resettled indigenous communities from land earmarked for commercial agricultural development [...] and] has forcibly evicted indigenous communities using fear, violence and intimidation" (The Oakland Institute 2013, 7-8).

Furthermore, the project is clearly aimed at destroying livelihoods and thus cultures, which the government quite openly deems as "backward" (HRW 2012b, 12; see also: Abbink 2011, 518). According to Human Rights Watch (2012b), "the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has explicitly stated that it does not value the way of life of indigenous communities in the Lower Omo and has declared its intention to make pastoralism moribund in southern Ethiopia" (p. 3). Many pastoralists are being forced to give up their cattle, and shifting agriculturalists are being coerced into sedentary cultivation (HRW 2012b, 56-61; HRW 2012a, 12). The government has stated that the purpose of

villagisation is to end what it sees as an irrational use of the land, and “to bring socioeconomic & cultural transformation” (cited in: HRW 2012, 2–3), enforced, in most cases, against people’s will. As argued by Abbink (2011), the ‘development’ propounded by the Ethiopian government involves the imposition of a ‘commodified’ land regime that disregards local inhabitants’ socio-cultural valuation of their ancestral territories (p. 524). One Bodi pastoralist told researchers: “Jobs on the sugar plantations? I never accept that benefit, not for us. You give me 1 billion birr and I would still rather have my cattle. That is who we are” (cited in: HRW 2012b, 17).

Even if some people *wanted* to take up salaried work in the new agro-industrial estates, so far very few jobs have been created through the land-lease scheme. Those that are on offer are poorly remunerated, with higher paid management positions reserved for people from outside the targeted regions. New employment does not come close to counterbalancing the large numbers of livelihoods destroyed by the program (Abbink 2011, 521). Moreover, according to Abbink (2011), though there are a handful of successful stories of investor partnerships, this “creative interaction does not hold for the majority of smallholders or for pastoralists” (p. 517). Hence the land lease program is falling short of its purported aim of fostering the ‘development’ (i.e. commercialisation) of local agriculture.

The attempt to impose a ‘cultural transformation’ by force is not only psychologically distressing for these communities, but is also putting their lives in danger: the government is destroying traditional livelihoods without providing viable alternatives. Obang Metho, Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia told researchers:

[The Anuak] used to live on riverbanks, but they are now in a place where there is no river. They are taken far away from fish, and they can’t fish at all. Land is their identity—it is what they breathe, and they’re taken away from that. Even now, some people are so stressed. They sit in camp and do nothing. Their way of living and their existence has been taken from them. [...] Before, the people had food, but now they are pushed to depend on food aid (The Oakland Institute 2013, 9).

People lost access to the rivers they need to fish and water their crops, the grazing lands they need for their animals, and the forests they need to collect wood and traditional medicines (The Oakland Institute 2013, 9; Abbink 2011, 519–520). The most common concern of those people interviewed by Human Rights Watch was the lack of access to food; a few interviewees reported that family members had died of starvation (2012a, 47–48). Even at a national level, the contribution of the land-lease program to food security is dubious, given that the produce of these projects is explicitly intended for export not local markets, and that much of the leased land is used to cultivate biofuels (Abbink 2011, 517–519).

People are not only dispossessed directly via enclosures, but also indirectly because of ecological destruction. According to Abbink (2011), environmental assessments are not being carried out prior to the implementation of agro-industrial projects. There have been reports of declining soil fertility, exhaustion and contamination of water sources, and the felling of native forests (Abbink 2011, 520). An additional worrying point is the potential for these programs to create tensions between different indigenous groups (HRW 2012b, 75). Indeed, a number of conflicts have emerged that are directly related to the displacement, dispossession and environmental degradation brought about by projects under the land leasing scheme (Abbink 2011, 522).

Even the purported infrastructural and social services benefits of villagization are questionable. Human Rights Watch (2012a) found that in 7 of 16 villages it visited in the

Gambella region, people had been relocated *from* locations *with* infrastructure (access to water, schools, clinics) *to* villages *without* any infrastructure (p. 39). Only two of the relocation sites visited by the organisation had (in-operational) grinding mills, just one had a new school and clinic (not in use), two had operational water infrastructure, and two had cleared land in preparation for agriculture (HRW 2012a, 27, 39–40). The Oakland Institute reports similar findings: the government had not yet provided promised schools, clinics and running water in many settlements.

In short, the wellbeing of local communities, rather than being increased by resettlement has been jeopardised by the program. Hence, it is unclear on what basis the displacement occurring in Ethiopia should be labelled ‘development-induced’, unless by development we mean the violent imposition of exclusive land-use rights that favour private agro-industry at the expense of local communities. The term land-grab-induced displacement seems to better encapsulate the phenomena at hand.

At the root of the problem are questions of state legitimacy and public interest. The state is considered the one and only ‘legitimate’ expropriator; legal systems worldwide contain some reference to this, whether it be known as ‘eminent domain’, ‘compulsory purchase’ or ‘acquisition’. It is assumed that the state acts as a protector of the public good, which warrants the bestowal of this right. This right of expropriation is almost always conditional upon a) it only being used in cases where the ‘public’ interest demands it (or variations upon this theme) and b) that ‘just’ compensation is provided. Though the terms ‘eminent domain’ or ‘compulsory purchase’ technically refer to the expropriation of *private* property for public purpose, similar principles apply to any expropriation (e.g. privatisation of public lands) that involves displacing and dispossessing the original inhabitants. For example, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement state: “Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence. The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement: [...] (c) in cases of large-scale development projects, which are not justified by *compelling and overriding public interests*” (UNOCHA 2004, Principle 6, my emphasis)¹¹.

Unfortunately it is often not safe to assume that government officials prioritise the public good, even in countries considered ‘democracies’ with ‘advanced’ legal systems. What is labelled as ‘economic development in the public interest’ is sometimes more accurately described as minority profiteering. The label of development tends to neutralise what might otherwise be considered an extreme form of violence. One of the “legal niceties of land theft” described by Alden Wily (2012) is the revision of clauses pertaining to the definition of “public purpose [... which was] explicitly expanded in most land laws [on the African continent] during the 1990-2010 era to include private investments which support economic growth” (p. 768). Finally, often no amount of money can provide ‘just compensation’ to the communities affected; consider the words of the Bodi pastoralist cited above- not even a billion birr could convince the man to give up his cattle for a job on the sugar plantation.

On the one hand, conflicts over development-induced displacement (or perhaps, more aptly, land-grab-induced displacement) are essentially struggles over diverging notions of human wellbeing. For some, the most efficient production system is the one that is least damaging to the

¹¹The UN guidelines and those proposed by other international agencies such as the World Bank include a number of other principles, such as: the rule of last resort (displacement is only admissible where there are no viable alternatives) and cost-benefit proportionality, consultation and participation (especially in decision making surrounding the relocation process), adequate resettlement (relevant authorities must ensure that this complies with minimum rights in terms of food, housing, health, etc.) and compensation of displaced persons for lost property and livelihoods (IDMC 2004, 3–6).

environment and sustains the largest number of livelihoods, to others efficiency is defined by (e.g.) tons of grain produced per hectare or minimal production costs translated into large profit margins. Some would reject the use of efficiency as a measure of development altogether. Indigenous communities, who are the most vulnerable to eviction (IDMC 2004, 2), are also least likely to share a vision of human wellbeing based on capitalist development. On the other hand, the most basic human needs are *objective* measures of wellbeing; they are criteria independent of value judgements. In this sense, regardless of our personal values, where access to food and water is jeopardised (as in the case of Ethiopian villagization, above), it makes little sense to defend the label of development-induced displacement, unless by ‘development’ we mean specifically *capitalist* development irrespective of human wellbeing. Of course, there are cases where the situation is less clear-cut - instances where this idea of forcibly displacing a minority to benefit the majority is not quite so dubious. The trouble is that these cases, where the notion of public interest might be reasonably applied, appear to be the exception rather than the norm.

The type of discourse employed by the Ethiopian government (see above) and other entities that support large-scale land acquisitions echoes the logic of colonial expropriation. As noted by Wood (2002), in the “early days of agrarian capitalism” the privatization of the commons was justified using the notion of “improvement”, a central concept in Locke’s theory of property, which “could be used to defend the enclosure of ‘unprofitable’ land at home, as well as territory in the colonies that was not being put to commercially profitable use by indigenous populations” (p. 112-114). Alden Wily (2012) compares legal texts involved in land appropriation from different regions and epochs, arguing that two core notions remain essentially unchanged: i) lands that are not part of the capitalist system of property and production are represented as “vacant” and available for taking and ii) alternative systems of land use and ownership are portrayed as obstacles to economic prosperity. Similarly, McMichael (2012) questions the assumption found in the conventional “development narrative [...] that subsistence or near-subsistence producers are necessarily poor and would benefit from jobs [...] identifying wealth with money” (p. 694). These discourses work in conjunction with government policies to legitimate dispossession and displacement.

Once empirical, analytical and normative pressure is applied to concepts such as ‘public good’, ‘economic development’ and ‘legitimate expropriation’, the conventional distinction between conflict-induced and development-induced displacement starts to dissolve. It is usually assumed that the causes and the effects of these two types of displacement are widely divergent and that they are mutually exclusive. Development-induced displacement, or as some prefer ‘involuntary resettlement’, is considered an organised relocation of people, implemented ‘lawfully’ by the state for the benefit of the general public, which with the right policies will carry only minimum ‘negative externalities’, or ideally improves circumstances for those relocated. At worst, the ‘negative externalities’ will be high; from a mainstream perspective the problem is poorly designed and implemented policy. Hence, a large portion of the literature on development-induced displacement (including work that is considerably critical) is dedicated to explaining the failures of past resettlement programs in order to suggest how to improve future projects in terms of the wellbeing of the displaced (Rew, Fischer & Pandey 2002; Koenig 2002; De Wet 2002; Steil and Duan 2002; Downing 2002).

Conflict-induced displacement, in contrast, is represented as a chaotic and unorganised process, caused by actions of illegally armed groups (or ‘undemocratic’ governments), in contravention of international human rights law. Not only are the consequences dire for the people who are uprooted, but the overall development impact, it is thought, tends to be negative.

Indeed, underdevelopment is often cited as both a cause and effect of conflict-induced displacement; while ‘involuntary resettlement’ is the exact inverse of this: development is both (the alleged) cause and (often disputed) effect. Consider the following citations taken from two separate World Bank publications on involuntary resettlement and forced displacement respectively:

Infrastructure development [...] often requires acquisition of land [...] Such acquisition can adversely affect the socioeconomic well-being of the people whose assets are acquired, as well as the communities they live in. [...] Well-designed and well-implemented resettlement can, however, turn involuntary resettlement into a development opportunity (World Bank 2004, xvii).

What causes the conflict or persecution that triggers forced displacement is in many cases, related to the lack or failure of development [...] Ignoring the need to find durable solutions for IDPs and refugees/returnees can negatively affect development since their continued marginalization may hinder economic and social progress (Christensen and Harild 2009, 11-12).

Overall, one is led to think that conflict and development -induced displacement are separate and distinct phenomena. The conventional distinction between the two categories is rooted in two themes: the law and development. To reiterate, development-induced displacement is considered a relocation that is imposed lawfully in the name of ‘public’ (usually economic) interest, while conflict-induced displacement is thought of as a violation of legal principles with devastating consequences for the economy. These two themes are also central to understanding land grabbing more generally (on law and land grabbing see: Alden Wily 2012; on development and land grabs see: e.g. McMichael 2012; White *et al.* 2012). Accordingly, in certain instances, the issues of law and development unite these two categories of forced migration (under the rubric of land-grab-induced displacement), rather than distinguishing them as is habitually implied. For example, as highlighted in the previous section, a key problem in the context of the Colombian conflict has been the (ab)use of the law to legalise the occupation of land acquired through violent displacement. This dispossession ties into the country’s economy in complex ways. Many paramilitaries consider themselves agents of economic development (see above), and so long as we measure ‘development’ by indicators such as investment growth and stimulation of private property markets, then the paramilitary’s claims are not so far-fetched¹².

Counter-intuitively, some instances of deliberate displacement through violence (conventionally categorised as conflict-induced) may have more in common with cases classified as development induced-displacement than they do with collateral-damage type conflict-induced displacement. In other words, there may be more commonalities between what are typically considered different types of displacement (or across different categories), than there are between instances considered the same type (or within categories). Certain cases of development-induced and conflict-induced displacement have similar causes (in terms of underlying reasons and motivations), effects, and mechanisms (combination of violent and juridical means), though the actors (e.g. government vs. paramilitaries) imposing the displacement may be different, *at least on the surface*.

Disaster-induced displacement and land grabbing in the context of the 2004 tsunami

The third quotation at the beginning of this paper is part of a larger story that some have called the “second tsunami” (Klein 2007, 395; Shanmugaratnam 2005, 6). The 2004 tsunami left over

¹²See: Thomson (2011) for a detailed discussion of the links between economic ‘development’ and violent conflict in Colombia.

240,000 people dead and 1 million displaced (Fletcher, Stover, and Weinstein 2005, 1). After the waters receded many people returned to their home villages to start rebuilding. Some, however, were prevented from doing so. A wave of “land theft” (Leckie 2005) swept across Southeast Asia, obscured by the aftermath of the tsunami.

Thailand, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka all imposed ‘buffer zones’ as part of their ‘coastal redevelopment’ post-tsunami. Buffer zone rules vary from region to region, but they basically constitute a prohibition of or disincentive for (re-)construction within a certain distance from the shoreline (between 50 to 500 meters). Official housing for those displaced by the tsunami was constructed well outside the buffer zone, many sites as far as two to five kilometres inland (land closer to the beach but outside the buffer zone was often already occupied). This had disastrous implications for people’s livelihoods given that most depended on fishing and small beach tourism businesses¹³ (Shanmugaratnam 2005, 2; Rice 2005, 21). Authorities used different methods to coerce people into accepting this relocation. In India, Thailand and Sri Lanka, those who were willing to relocate were offered a free home or aid with reconstruction, while those who wished to rebuild on their original sites (within the buffer zone) were denied government support (Cohen 2011, 233; Fletcher, Stover, and Weinstein 2005, 19, 64–65; Rice 2005, 14, 19). A number of returnees in Sri Lanka and Thailand claim that the government refused to reconnect power and water to their homes as a means of pressurizing them to accept resettlement (Rice 2005, 16; Cohen 2011, 230). A few people reported actually being physically stopped from rebuilding their homes, while others were evicted shortly after returning, i.e. they were displaced a second time in the name of the buffer zone. Many villagers were forced to relocate even though their homes were unaffected by the tsunami, or at least still standing (Cohen 2011, 233; Fletcher, Stover, and Weinstein 2005, 38, 86–87; Rice 2005, 11, 13, 21).

Allegedly these buffer zones were/are a protection measure, intended to reduce the potential damage of future climatic events, especially loss of human life. Shanmugaratnam (2005) reports that among the people he/she interviewed in Sri Lanka “fear of another tsunami” was the “sole reason” for accepting relocation outside the buffer zone (p. 2). Nevertheless, there are clear indications that motives other than residents’ safety were behind the policy. In Sri Lanka and India in particular, high-end tourist businesses and large-scale fishing industries were exempted from the new rules. Thus there are clear signs that the value of safety was actually just a smokescreen for the displacement of local fishing communities to make way for more profitable ventures. In many cases, local authorities had been mulling over the removal of fishing communities from economically strategic areas before the tsunami hit (Cohen 2011, 233–234; Klein 2007, 385–405; Rice 2005, 17, 21–22; Fletcher, Stover, and Weinstein 2005, 64–65, 98; Shanmugaratnam 2005, 3–5).

Naomi Klein (2007) provides a detailed account of post-tsunami dispossession in Arugam Bay, a small fishing village on Sri Lanka’s coast, where tensions over land had been simmering months before the disaster. Representatives of the hotel industry had already been lobbying for the relocation of local residents. A fire had burnt down 24 fishing huts. Some believe that this was an act of arson, designed to intimidate the community into relocation. If that was the purpose, it didn’t work; residents were not willing to give up their lands. Klein (2007) writes: “When the tsunami came, it did what the fire couldn’t: it cleared the beach completely” (p. 387). The government swiftly pushed forward legislation prohibiting construction within 200

¹³ A study (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation 2009) conducted across 20 relocation sites in Sri Lanka found that despite improvements in housing quality, overall the resettlement program had serious negative impacts on people’s livelihoods, with reported decreases in family earnings and access to food and education. Many families ended up leaving their resettlement homes and some sites were abandoned entirely.

meters of the beach. Police enforced the new measure, preventing returnees from rebuilding. Meanwhile,

federal government had commissioned a team of international consultants to develop a reconstruction blueprint for Arugam Bay [...] The report enthused that Arugam Bay was to serve as a model for up to thirty new nearby “tourism zones”, turning the previously war-torn east coast of Sri Lanka into a South Asian Riviera. Missing from all the artists’ impressions and blueprints were the victims of the tsunami—the hundreds of fishing families who used to live and work on the beach. The report explained that villagers would be moved to more suitable locations, some several kilometres away and far from the ocean. Making matters worse, the \$80 million redevelopment project was to be financed with aid money raised in the name of the victims of the tsunami. [...] the “reconstruction” meant nothing less than the deliberate destruction of their culture and way of life and the theft of their land (Klein 2007, 388–389).

According to Cohen (2011), the government later retracted these plans due to fierce opposition and protest; still, he claims, with or without the backing of a formal project, this type of high-end tourist development has continued apace in Arugam Bay (p. 234).

Government use of ‘reconstruction’ and ‘coastal zoning’ policies as a cover up for dispossessing communities to make way for commercial development is what Cohen (2011) categorises as “strategic land grabs”. The best-documented cases of displacement related to the safety buffer zone policy, or “strategic land grabs”, are from India (Tamil Nadu) and Sri Lanka. In Thailand, Cohen argues, “predatory land grabs” predominated instead¹⁴. Cohen (2011) defines these as patchwork cases where particular firms or individuals take advantage of a disaster to acquire land by a diversity of ad-hoc methods.

Methods of ‘predatory’ land grabbing to some extent related to the tenure systems in place prior to the tsunami. The loss of documents as a result of the disaster, including property titles and other records (typically used to support land rights claims), made victims of the tsunami particularly vulnerable to dispossession. Others, lacking formal property titles in the first place, relied on customary land rights that depend on demonstration of (usually extended) occupation. In such cases, temporary absence from the village and the destruction of houses and plots by the tsunami could be used to undermine residents’ claims to their land. As Williams (2006) put it: “the sweeping away of existing symbols and evidence of historically enjoyed rights of possession, the major form of tenure security of the poor, is likely to rekindle old disputes and create new ones” (cited in: Cohen 2011, 227). In these circumstances, some people were coerced into selling their land; others had no documents to counter fraudulent land titles in legal disputes; and land was often taken through de-facto occupation - for example, hotel owners expanded their property boundaries by moving fences or building new ones, in addition to erecting large “No Trespassing” signs. Many individuals were prevented from rebuilding on public lands that they had occupied for decades. Some reported being attacked or threatened when they attempted to return. Often people “are afraid of speaking out because they fear being blacklisted and cut off from governmental assistance, which is supervised by the same local administrators who have, in some cases, conspired with developers to take over public lands in their communities” (Fletcher, Stover, and Weinsten 2005, 86). There is evidence of such trends across tsunami-affected countries, but especially in Thailand, as noted above (Cohen 2011, 229–232; Fletcher, Stover, and Weinsten 2005, 40, 86–87; Rice 2005, 19–20).

¹⁴Cohen (2011) does count the eviction of local communities from public lands and protected areas in post-tsunami Thailand as examples of “strategic land grabs”, though he maintains that these displacement policies were not as systematic as those implemented in India and Sri Lanka and that they were unrelated to the safety buffer zones.

Nearly a decade on from the tsunami, the number of people forcibly displaced (or denied return) and the amount of land grabbed by whom, how, and for what purposes remains unclear. Some individuals and communities resisted relocation or took on legal battles to resolve land disputes and were able to return home (Rice 2005, 18–20), but many others were not so fortunate. There is apparently no quantitative data and very little follow-up research.

Where the land of those displaced (for the first or second time) under the safety buffer zone policy was reallocated for commercial uses, the accuracy of the label ‘disaster-induced displacement’ is undermined. In any case where natural hazards are used as a pretext for transferring strategic lands to the private sector, the concept of land-grab-induced displacement is more accurate. Such stories are apparently not uncommon. In Colombia people told me that local officials cleared out entire communities from desirable areas in the town where I lived, alleging that the zone was at high risk of landslides only to later build exclusive housing for wealthier residents in the very same place. In other parts of Colombia, citizens expressed concern that avalanche and landslide risk was used as an excuse for forcible displacement that was truly driven by corporate mining interests (UNAL 2011). Of course there are cases where resettlement really is carried out in the interest of protecting people from natural hazards. Still, in any case where the lands of the displaced are quickly ‘redistributed’ to others, claims that relocation was about safety and disaster prevention require serious scrutiny.

Where displacement is originally caused by a natural event such as a tsunami, the label of disaster-induced displacement may be justified. Nevertheless, when this displacement is exploited as an opportunity for usurpation, the argument for bringing the political economy of land into our analyses stands. Finally, there are other scenarios where disaster and land-grabs intertwine in more complex ways. For example, mining activities that contribute to soil erosion and thus risk of landslides, or diversion of water sources by industrial agriculture, are also potential causes of forced migration. Here one case of land grabbing may not only directly displace the original inhabitants of the area, but also be indirectly responsible for the forced relocation of people in the vicinity due to so-called ‘natural’ disasters. As noted by Wisner *et al.* (2004), disasters are not just “natural events”, “they are also the product of social, political and economic environments” (p. 4). Of particular interest here is the complex interrelation between land-use and ‘natural’ hazards (Wisner *et al.* 2004, 23), given that land-grabs frequently entail land use change that could potentially increase the risk of disaster.

Concluding remarks: political economy and land-grab-induced displacement

None of the three conventional categories of forced migration sufficiently account for displacement driven by land-grabbing. First, the category of conflict-induced displacement lumps different processes together under a single label. The concept does not differentiate between cases where displacement is the unfortunate by-product of violent conflict and those instances where displacement is the purpose of violence. Arguably, as a result, ‘collateral damage’ type displacement dominates perception of the topic. While the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (considered the leading organisation working on the issue) recognises that displacement is often “deliberate”, it fails to associate this with the problem of land usurpation. This and other resources, such as the Forced Migration Online webpage, do not give analytical weight to land questions.

Second, the notion of development-induced displacement is imbued with a distorting ideological tint. The implicit connotation is that displacement classed within this category is a necessary ill undertaken for the greater public good. Yet, in many cases, so-called ‘development’

displacees are dispossessed to make way for the profit-making prerogative of a minority elite. 'Development' is one of those untouchable concepts like 'democracy' and 'freedom', and thus attaching it to cases of displacement has the effect of sterilising a process marked by struggle and conflict. Moreover, the distinction between development-induced and conflict-induced displacement, which are presented as opposing and mutually exclusive categories, is often untenable. The characteristics that are alleged to distinguish the two types can easily be inverted: displacement occurring in conflict settings may be systematically planned, have the veneer of legality and appeal to economic progress as justification, just as cases of so-called 'development-induced displacement' may be chaotic, violent, and unjust.

Finally, the category of disaster-induced displacement may sometimes mask the underlying reasons for which people are either forced to flee or are unable to return to their homes. On the one hand, 'disaster prevention' may be used as a pretext for expropriating economically strategic lands. On the other, the aftermath of a disaster often becomes a scenario for opportunistic land-grabbing. Here the original displacement is actually caused by a disaster, but it is the usurpers who prevent victims from rebuilding their homes.

The examples from Colombia, Ethiopia and South-East Asia (post-tsunami) sketched above illustrate how the conventional classification of forced displacement (conflict-induced, development-induced, and disaster-induced, respectively) can be misleading in certain instances. In all three cases, the concept of land-grab-induced displacement provides a more exact depiction of the problem. The concept, by its nature, forces one to put land at the centre of analysis. As such, it necessitates attention to the very issue that is too often ignored by those who work on the problem of forced migration: land.

Land is not merely a financial asset or a production input; it constitutes social relationships, forms structures of power, shapes identities, and is central to ecological reproduction (Borras and Franco 2010; Akram-Lodhi 2007). A critical political economy approach allows for appreciation of these varied social dimensions, while at the same time raising the issue of how capitalist logic "transform[s] the socially embedded character of land into that of a more abstract, and hence alienated, commodity" (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 1439). Concepts typically associated with political economy such as 'enclosure', 'primitive accumulation', 'accumulation by dispossession', and 'commodification' are not only useful tools for the analysis of land questions, but may also offer a distinct angle on the issue of forced displacement. Marxist scholars have long studied the relationship between the commodification of land and the dispossession and destruction of the peasantry. In this sense, as Arturo Escobar (2003) puts it: "Marx can be credited with the initial theory of displacement linked to the history of capitalist modernity: his discussion of primitive accumulation [...] was one of the first statements on displacement on a large scale" (p. 161). Nevertheless, few political economy scholars engage directly with the literature on forced migration. The remainder of this paper provides a brief overview of how scholarship on the political economy of land could contribute to the study of forced displacement.

Political economy prompts questions of how forced migration relates to wider social change, rather than treating displacement as an isolated event. For example, is a particular case of land-grab-induced displacement linked to the destruction of smallholder production and its replacement by commercial agro-industry? Have the displaced been integrated into a growing wage labour force, or have they been pushed into a precarious situation of un- or under-employment? Are uprooted people fleeing to swelling urban slums, or have they sought to re-establish themselves as self-sufficient smallholders in peripheral rural areas, colonising the

shrinking ‘agricultural frontiers’? This is by no means an exhaustive list. These types of questions point to the possible socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological implications of land-grab-induced displacement. Such social change cannot be understood without an analysis of relations and structures of power, and accompanying conflicts and struggles.

Political economy also enables us to understand how cases of forced displacement form part of the global political economy. What from a conventional perspective appear as disparate and unconnected ‘events’ of forced displacement, when seen through a political economy lens are similar processes that share the same underlying dynamic of accelerated land commodification, corresponding to global capitalist accumulation imperatives. In short, there may be causal relations between a) global accumulation dynamics, b) the deepening and expansion of land markets, and c) forced displacement, *whether considered illegal or ‘legal’, carried out by state or non-state actors, taking violent or legislative forms*. Of course, there is great diversity within the ‘category’ of land-grab-induced displacement. Hence one would need to explore how this relationship (global accumulation dynamics – land commodification - dispossession and displacement) plays out in diverse ways in different settings.

Some of the more recent processes of displacement might be understood as part of a wider trend, popularly referred to as the ‘global land rush’. This rush for land corresponds to a shift in agribusiness strategy as a result of increased “comparative advantages of ownership of productive assets versus coordination along the value chain” (Cotula 2012, 665). Furthermore, investors external to the agricultural sector have also taken an increasing interest in land, calling it the “oil of the future” (FCBI 2011, 15). Thus, in recent years, a confluence of factors has encouraged the insertion of large swathes of territory in the developing world into global capitalist markets¹⁵. The characteristics and causes of this rush for land are complex. These *characteristics* (who is acquiring land, where, how and for what purpose?) and *causes* (what triggered this rush for land and what conditions have enabled it?) have been the main focus of the literature, and thus are well outlined elsewhere. There is relative agreement that “the convergence of food, energy and financial crises” (Borras *et al.* 2012, 851; see also: McMichael 2012; Cotula 2012, White *et al.* 2012) since 2007 has been a key driving force. Land has become more attractive to investors as a result of rising prices of agricultural commodities (used for food, animal feed and biofuels), combined with declining profitability in traditional investment spheres in the wake of the financial crisis.

Often the terms ‘global land grab’ and ‘global land rush’ are used interchangeably; however, I argue for a conceptual distinction between the two. On the one hand, my own definition differentiates land grabbing from ‘everyday’ land market transactions, in terms of it being a *particularly coercive* form of land acquisition - hence land *grab*. In a ‘typical’ land-grab scenario, government agents (or illegally armed groups, powerful individuals or a mixture of actors) dispossess local communities of their land using legislation (simultaneously to eviction or ex-post facto) and forced (often violent) displacement, in order to allocate it (whether through sale, concession, or long-term lease) to private companies. On the other hand, the global land rush, or the rapid growth of investment in land, involves *both* ‘ordinary’ land market transactions and land grabs. In this sense, the global land rush is fuelling land grabbing.

Thus, the global political economy of land is currently undergoing a series of transformations with profound implications for the issue of dispossession and displacement.

¹⁵ A study funded by the World Bank (Deininger *et al.* 2011) estimates that 56.6 million hectares were the subject of large-scale land acquisitions in the space of just one year (2008-2009). Africa (accounting for over two-thirds of the land acquired) is the region most intensely affected by the land rush, followed by Asia and Latin America.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on land grabbing and the land rush refers only fleetingly to the problem of displacement (White *et al.* 2012, 641; McMichael 2012, 693-695). In some cases it merely points out that not all land grabs entail people being displaced (Borras *et al.* 2012, 854-857; Borras and Franco 2012, 52), while in others it doesn't mention the issue at all (Cotula 2012). Hence, political economists focusing on land questions ought to engage more directly with discourses surrounding forced displacement and vice versa: there is a need for forced migration specialists to pay more attention to the political economy of land.

The concept of land-grab-induced displacement, which draws on critical political economy, sheds light on issues that are shrouded by the conventional typologies of forced migration. Displacement, frequently treated as an ugly by-product of violent conflicts and 'natural' disasters, or an unfortunate sacrifice necessitated by 'development', may often be better understood as part of the political economy of land - closely connected to social struggles over territory and 'land-based resources'.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Renata Fitzpatrick and Garrett Thomson, and to my supervisors: Ben Selwyn and Lara Coleman, for their helpful comments and support. Also, thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their advice and encouragement. I am extremely grateful to the UK Economic and Social Research Council (award number: T83833F) and the University of Sussex for funding my doctoral studies.

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